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**Bridging divides - social science, educational policy and the  
improvement of education and training systems:  
An appreciation the contribution of David Raffe (1950-2015)**

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## **A celebration of four decades of David Raffe's research and writing**

It is nearly three years since the death of Professor David Raffe in February 2015 and this special issue of the Journal of Education and Work seeks to commemorate his enormous contribution to educational research. Everyone who passes is missed, but losing David has left a particular intellectual void in the field of education and training, research and policy advocacy.

David made a comprehensive and distinctive contribution to the understanding of post-compulsory education and training in the UK and internationally. But this loss is not only intellectual; it is also personal. At his funeral and in the commemorations and tributes that followed, a rich picture emerged. Anyone who had worked with David would know this, but the shared knowledge of David as a human being was particularly powerful. He was known for his seriousness, modesty, integrity and his openness in all his encounters. He was social scientist and intellectual of great repute who would put himself to the back of the queue and make sacrifices to help his colleagues. It is this whole David that we sorely miss. And these are feelings that do not diminish with the passing of time because the qualities he demonstrated are profoundly needed in public life today.

Over a period of nearly 40 years, David's research and writing were extremely diverse and the contexts for his work ranged from the Scottish education system, home international comparisons across the four countries of the UK and more globally. David joined the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at Edinburgh University in 1978, only a few years after its creation by Andrew MacPherson. Andrew was its first Director and with David (and other colleagues) established CES as a unit that was widely acknowledged to be the leading centre for empirical sociology in the UK. From 1987 David jointly directed the CES with Andrew, then with Andrew's retirement in 1994, continuing to develop the research and reputation of the Centre. He also engaged with the wider policy world at different levels, contributing to policy development in Scotland by participating to various reviews and national committees. David also contributed to international fora such as the EU VETNET.

Over the decades, David's research and writing appeared to be ever expanding. His work started in the mid-1970s around the theme of youth unemployment, a reflection of the major changes taking place in the youth labour market in Scotland at that time. As the decade progressed and then into the 1980s, he began to look more broadly at issues of youth transitions. This work had a strong conceptual and methodological focus relating to how the transition process could be understood and how it could be empirically analysed with the use of national surveys. David was one of the founders of the European Transitions in Youth Network and participated in several cross-national research projects using different national surveys to help understand school-to-work transitions.

In response to the reform of curriculum and qualifications that had gathered pace in Scotland in the 1980s, David himself turned to curriculum and qualifications; the Scottish Action Plan and similar developments in England. This gave him an opportunity to reflect on how the different contexts in the two countries shaped the newly emerging pre-vocational programmes and how they responded to changes in the youth labour market in very different ways. His Anglo-Scottish comparative studies on qualifications and curriculum structures in secondary and upper secondary education, played a major role in what was virtually a new field of educational research in both countries. This led to the debate, still with us to this day, on unified systems of post-16 curriculum, qualifications and governance, as a way of bridging the academic/vocational divide. He contributed in 1990 to the influential IPPR publication *A British Baccalaureate* that provided the first blueprint of a unified baccalaureate model for the English context.

Towards the end of the 1990s, David extended the comparative dimension of his research across the four countries of the UK and coined the term 'home internationals', after the controversial four-country football matches<sup>1</sup>. The issues of convergence and divergence of the national post-compulsory education systems of the UK would provide continuing focus for his research and publications

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<sup>1</sup> 'Home internationals' refer to the four countries of the UK, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

from the later 1990s onwards'. The comparative Education and Youth transitions project was 2003-06 and David worked on divergence/convergence in HE throughout the 2000s right up to his death.

By the turn of the century David's research took an increasingly international focus; he returned to the theme of youth transitions, but beyond Scottish and UK borders. At the same time, the Scottish education system remained a strong locus of his work in the continuing analysis of *Higher Still* and the impact of the flexible curriculum and qualifications arrangements in Scotland. David's research on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework brought him into the field of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) that were developing across different national systems world-wide. He played a key role in the International Labour Organisation's project on implementing NQFs across five continents, which culminated in a Special Issue of this journal in 2011 and in 2013 and a book by Michael Young and Stephanie Allais.

In more recent years, as young people's transitions became more complex and prolonged with the critical period for social inequality pushed up to the post-compulsory stages and to HE, David also began to engage with the issue of stratification of higher education across the four countries of the UK. He never lost sight of the experience of young people and continued to write about youth transitions and progression that remained central to his work throughout his career. Another theme in his later work were policies concerned with system reform and improvement of education and this led, not only to his engagement with a range of reviews and committees in Scotland and other countries of the UK, but also to sustained academic outputs. It was this work and its international dimension that contributed to the now widely recognized distinction between 'policy borrowing' and 'policy learning'. A number of continuous threads ran through David's work which all began with his sympathetic, but not uncritical respect for the Scottish education system and its traditions. They included his unique focus on relationships across the four countries of the UK and the light they cast on the English system, policies for system improvement and the challenges of differentiation and stratification in education and training systems that were expanding.

David's work became known for a particular style of scholarship that was uniquely his. It originated in the widely respected Oxford tradition of empirical research associated with John Goldthorpe, where he completed his doctoral studies. While continuing to exploit the strengths of analytical statistics, David, overlaid these with rich conceptual distinctions that enabled him to raise questions about the implications of the assumptions that policy makers too easily took for granted. Examples that run through his work are his distinctions between 'content' and 'context' in the reform process; between 'employment' and 'educational logics' affecting the transitions of young people to working life; and between 'internal' and 'external' labour markets in relation to young people's selection for employment. The importance of these distinctions are acknowledged by contributors to this Special Issue. However, the theoretical depth and range of application of the concepts he developed is often missed. One, his distinction between 'institutional' and 'intrinsic' logics, illustrates this particularly well. Although originally developed by David in his analysis of modularization in Scotland, the distinction turned out to have much wider implications in the work in which he was involved concerning National Qualification Frameworks.

David was always an empirical sociologist who tried to keep as close as possible to his data, and, as Linda Croxford and Cathy Howieson explain in their article, he placed great emphasis on the public availability of data sets on young people so that a system 'can know itself'. In the early years of his career, he was very much a 'hands-on' researcher; working on the design of surveys and the creation of variables as well as carrying out data analysis. In doing so, he showed how sociological concepts such as social class could be operationalized, paying attention to detail while bearing in mind the wider meaning. This helped to provide the basis for what is arguably David's unique contribution from the perspective of sociology as a whole: his concepts. These have much similarity in their explanatory powers to those of the great American sociologist, Robert K. Merton and his 'theories of the middle range'. Like Merton's, David's concepts such as 'institutional and intrinsic logics' and 'context and content' were not 'general' theories such as those of Talcott Parsons and others. Positioned in the middle ground between grand theory and practice, David's conceptual distinctions have, nevertheless, become part of the 'lingua franca' of sociology, especially the sociology of education, and have helped build bridges both

between more theoretical and empirical studies and between the sociological community, policy-makers, practitioners and fellow academics in different fields.

David combined his conceptual insights with a deep commitment to social justice and believed that research had a vital role, indeed a responsibility, to rigorously examine the education, training and employment system's attempts to extend quality. A primary role of research for him was to hold government and others to account. This was not an abstract idea for David; he frequently stated that the ultimate beneficiaries of research were the young people whose life chances were affected (for good or for ill) by government policies. He brought to policy research a combination of clarity of thought, a pragmatic and practical approach to using evidence to resolve problems and a capacity for conceptual insight and intellectual integrity the legacy of which we have in his published work.

He was an outstanding analyst of educational systems who always sought to collaborate with others to help bring about improvements, not only in Scotland but also internationally, within the UK and beyond. It was this combination of great intellectual qualities, and a commitment to collaborate to improve education, together with his modest personal style and quiet humour, that earned him lasting respect, admiration and affection across the research, policy and practitioner communities. It was these qualities that helped bridge multiple divides and that informed our title for this volume of the journal.

### **Bridging divides - social science, educational policy and the improvement of education and training systems**

This special issue of the *Journal of Education and Work* thus seeks to recognize, celebrate and engage with David's intellectual contribution in terms of the substantive areas of his work over the years, the cross-cutting themes and theoretical conceptualizations that he left us with.

In a world that has become increasingly fragmented, David's work represented several different dimensions of bridge-building – between elements of the sociological tradition and the wider academic and policy communities; between the

academic and vocational worlds; between national contexts and transnational reforms and between analysis and critique and system improvement. The theme of improving education systems by making them more comprehensive and inclusive and less divided and the implications of these priorities in a world that remains resolutely unequal, had a consistent presence in David's work that spanned nearly four decades. Underpinning his work was his distinctive style of scholarship that recognized that system improvement is unlikely to take place by uncritically importing so-called 'best practice' from one context to another. He consistently argued that social justice could be best served by 'policy learning' that involved policy actors understanding the histories and specificities of their own national contexts rather than by the process of 'policy borrowing' from other contexts or countries. It was this understanding that formed the basis of dialogues he engaged in with those from other contexts in order to exchange ideas about 'good practice' generated in each of these contexts.

In aiming to take forward these legacies, as editors we approached a number of leading researchers in the field of education and training in Scotland, across the UK and internationally who had formed a relationship with David's work. The themes chosen broadly align with areas of his work over the decades and authors were asked to not only relate their intellectual contribution to this body of work, but to approach the task critically in order to take forward David's intellectual legacy.

### **To know ourselves? Research, data and policy making in the Scottish education system**

Cathy Howieson and Linda Croxford (University of Edinburgh), consider the importance of an education and training system 'knowing itself', and highlight the essential role of consistent and reliable data, and an independent research capacity, in creating such self-knowledge. They focus on the work of David and other members of the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) in discussing the changing context of research on education and training policy over the past 40 years and comment on the current absence of consistent and reliable data, lack of government interest in funding research and a resultant 'policy amnesia'. The authors illustrate the tensions in the research-policy relationship and draw attention to the importance of the plurality of support in sustaining a country's independent research capacity— a matter of direct concern to David as Director of CES, a largely self-funding research centre. A central aspect of David's work was an intense interest in the ways in which national



education and training systems could ‘know themselves’; to understand their key characteristics and logics – leading to what David referred to as ‘policy learning’ in order to be able to improve. Key to this has been the ability of policy makers to not only learn from international comparisons, but also to appreciate the specificities of their own systems in their historical contexts.

### **Transitions to university: the role of colleges in Scotland and England**

Jim Gallacher (Glasgow Caledonian University) writes about ‘Widening access to higher education through the college route: questions and challenges from the Scottish experience’. In this he draws attention to the important role of further education colleges in the ‘tertiary education system’ in Scotland, particularly in widening access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Both the numbers involved and the greater autonomy of colleges in relation to universities is noted in comparison with England. His research shows, however, that this distinctive college role is not without its challenges. For example, he points to the growing ambiguities in the role of ‘short cycle’ awards such as HNC/HND as they move from their earlier vocational function to providing a progression route to full degree standards. The extent to which students gain full credit for their HN qualifications, especially from the elite universities (the ‘ancients’ and the 1960s institutions), is a continuing issue and impacts on the length of time taken to complete (six years compared with normally four years). Most notably these problems have arisen in a Scottish education system that has achieved an international reputation for its system of credit accumulation and transfer. The article concludes with suggestions for closer working partnerships between colleges and universities in order to promote more effective progression, but without weakening the autonomy of Scottish colleges.

Jim’s research engages with David’s legacy in several ways – his focus for improving equity and opportunity for those young people who are not naturally bound for the ‘royal route’ of ‘highers’ to university; his interest in credit systems, his concerns about the stratification of higher education which David was taking an increasing interest in his latter years; the advantages of ‘home international’ comparisons and policy learning when looking for ways forward for Scottish colleges and a ‘realism’ about the assumed virtues of Scottish education. While David strongly supported the Scottish system and maintained that it held up well in terms of international

comparisons, he was not ‘dewy eyed’ about it, recognizing that it could involve policy complacency and elitism. David also understood some of the limits of Scottish distinctiveness; that there was much to be learned about patterns of institutional behaviour which were also UK-wide and that it continued to be challenged by factors common to all the countries in the UK. In all these respects, this article reflects important dimensions of the David Raffe intellectual legacy.

### **The Scottish approach to the modularisation of VET**

Matthias Pilz (University of Cologne) and Roy Canning (University of Stirling) revisit the issue of modularization in the Scottish education and training system. Scotland is widely recognized to have employed a relatively radical approach to modularization; a system feature stretching back to the mid-1980s. While the focus of their article is on vocational education and training (VET), it is worth noting modules have also been used in general education in Scotland.

The authors state at the outset that modularization (defined as units of learning that are bounded in both time and content, can be arranged flexibly, and are output-oriented) is a particular strategy in the VET curriculum and not without its controversies. Modularisation can be contrasted with linear approaches (longer and more integrated forms of learning with terminal assessments), though they treat both these models as ideal types and recognize that the implementation of modularization in national contexts may well involve a elements of each.

In order to help understand how modularization has been implemented in the Scottish VET, they utilize the distinction between ‘intrinsic and institutional logics’; one of David’s most innovative conceptual couplets. The authors analyse the outcomes of interviews with a range of key stakeholders, some three decades following the initial introduction of modular approaches to suggest that Scotland’s radical approach demonstrates both strengths and weaknesses. They note that ‘institutional logics’ continue to dominate ‘intrinsic logics’ and thus inhibit the development of more radical ‘choice-based’ and ‘pick and mix’ approaches to modularization. This reminds us to distinguish between some of the idealist rhetoric surrounding the Scottish system and the typical Scottish pragmatism when the reforms are introduced. This was a distinction that David recognized as important and one more reason to

argue for the need for research to help bridge the gap between curriculum vision and the realities of practice.

### **Curriculum choices and school-to-work transitions among upper-secondary school-leavers in Scotland and Ireland**

This article by Cristina Iannelli (University of Edinburgh) and Emer Smyth (Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin) is a comparative study, investigating the role of curriculum choices in secondary education in young people's labour market destinations in Ireland and Scotland. These two countries have systems that share important curriculum features - more general and less vocationally specific and work-based approach to upper secondary education for the so-called non-academic pupils. This type of system, that characterizes not only Ireland, but also all four countries of the UK, can be compared and contrasted with countries that have more work-related and apprenticeship-type approaches to the upper secondary phase, such as those following the German dual system approach. The article builds on earlier research with David by Christina (2007) by referring to the distinction between systems with an 'education logic' and those with an 'employment logic'.

Here, however, the authors focus on important internal differences within two systems that adopt an 'educational logic' but which vary in the degree of subject choice and the role of assessment in affecting the transitions of young people to working life. Scotland has a less standardised curriculum in which students have a greater degree of subject choice, which contrasts with greater degree of curriculum standardization in the Irish system. Drawing on data from Scottish and Irish school leaver surveys over the period 1987 – 2005, their analysis confirms their initial hypothesis that subject choice has been more influential in the more open, choice-based system in Scotland while grade attainment in Ireland has been more influential in determining which kinds of jobs are obtained by their school leavers. Their paper relates to David's interest in curriculum structure and organization, providing some evidence for his view that open systems may run the risk of increasing social and other types of inequalities since young people and their families vary in their capacity to 'negotiate' such a system and to make optimal choices. The historical comparison also has allowed them to reflect on the changing role of curriculum and assessment factors in transitions due to the deterioration of the youth labour market over the period. This

research reminds us of the continued need to develop a more holistic view of the role of national education and training systems in relation to changing labour markets. This wider form of analysis was present from the very beginning of David's work and that endured throughout his intellectual life.

### **English Exceptionalism revisited: divergent skill strategies across Britain.**

Ewart Keep (University of Oxford) begins by noting David's abiding interest in 'home international' comparisons of policy and practice across the UK and, in doing so, the author restates the increasingly compelling case for UK-wide comparisons in the area of post-compulsory education and training. The four countries still broadly share a UK-wide economy, and compared with European continental countries, similar cultures and institutions, and a common main language. At the same time, following democratic devolution with the development of distinct policies and separate Parliaments and Assemblies, they are experiencing increasing degrees of policy divergence in terms of education and training and now also with regards to economic policy. The divergence is not between all four countries of the UK, but principally between the three smaller countries and England and particularly the Scotland/England relationship. These differences have gained visibility as a result of the Brexit decision to leave the EU. In his comparison of English and Scottish policies in the area of skills development, Ewart points to fundamentally different directions of travel – a more market-oriented approach in England and a more state-oriented approach in Scotland. Nevertheless, and despite this important divergence, he points to similarities in terms of governmental desire north and south of the border for central control and the pressure for constant reform, although he accepts that England is much further down this road than Scotland.

The article concludes on a sobering note regarding the potential for policy learning in a context where the current balance of forces is towards divergence rather than convergence. This was another of David's preoccupations. At the time in which he was writing about the potential for 'policy learning' in the 'laboratory' of the UK, David saw the potential for dialogue between countries that still had fundamental features in common despite going about reform in different ways. This was the era that David referred to as 'managed divergence'. Since 2010 and the election of a Conservative-led UK government and particularly following the referendum vote in

June 2016, ‘managed divergence’ has given way to ‘accelerated divergence’ with the possibility of a complete divorce between England and Scotland and even between England and the other two countries of the UK. Ewart’s final words concern the willingness (or lack of it) of governments to undertake policy learning and suggests that this cannot be a one-sided relationship. In the foreseeable future, it may be ‘English exceptionalism’ (at least among the four countries, if not globally) that dominates the relationships across the UK. Despite the fact that some dialogue takes place ‘under the radar’, the three smaller countries that make up the UK find themselves in an increasingly difficult situation. It is in this new context that we particularly miss David’s historical and system-wide analysis that would appreciate the dramatically changed conditions being faced.

#### **Learning from Europe and for Europe with David Raffe - insights into early years of European cooperation in vocational education and training research**

Pekka Kämäräinen (University of Bremen and previously of CEDEFOP) writes a historical appreciation of David’s contribution to the establishment of European collaboration in the field of VET by a review of several cross-national initiatives and the role that David played in them. This highly personalized story of David’s contribution is woven into a rich account of the development of Europe-wide collaborations and debates in the area of post-16 education and training in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Pekka starts by recalling David’s distinctive contribution to the cross- European Project on ‘modularisation’. This was at a time in the 1990s when there was an aspiration that modularization could form a ‘common currency’ across all the national systems of the EU. David questioned this with the argument that the role of modularization should be viewed primarily through the lenses of the national contexts of implementation. This sensitivity to contexts of reform was to lead to David’s later work on ‘policy learning’. Pekka also writes about David’s contribution to the VETNET network and his willingness to learn about approaches to research that were not present in the British and Scottish research cultures. The idea of understanding different starting points for inquiry and working carefully towards common results was a hallmark of David’s open and collaborative intellectual approach. He also

offered advice concerning the development of NQF frameworks and it was his contextual comparative studies that provided a counter-balance to the assumption that a common EQF system design could be implemented across national systems that had different characteristics and cultures. Pekka concludes by emphasizing David's role as a team player, collaborator and someone who constantly questioned not only the desired outcomes of reforms, but also the side-effects and unanticipated outcomes.

### **Youth policy borrowing across language divides**

John Bynner (UCL Institute of Education) revisits the issue of policy learning and policy borrowing and the challenges of the latter across language divides. David had repeatedly pointed to the flaws in the international political search for 'excellent practice' to be transferred across different systems. Despite the fact that policy borrowing has been extensively critiqued in the era of PISA and international league tables, politicians are still seduced by the prospect of finding a 'magic bullet' to increase system performance in a competitive global world. Interestingly, policy borrowing across systems of the UK that continue to share an economy, key cultural assumptions and a common language has not really taken place due to, as Ewart Keep points out, the inhibiting force of increasingly divergent policy and politics. Policy-makers in the UK have thus tended to gaze further afield, albeit in different directions.

However, looking beyond your own system or that of close neighbouring systems, involves understanding VET arrangements in different societies at particular points in historical time. Moreover, the processes of proceeding along the different transition pathways to reach the occupational goal and the skills standards associated with them are likely to be perceived and understood differently. What is being observed are evolving systems that are understood through different linguistic terms.

John thus takes us to a particularly potent area for policy borrowing – the repeated and continued attempts in the UK (or more precisely England) to emulate the fabled German Dual System of VET. Looking back to projects on pathways and transitions in the 1980s and early 1990s, he notes how certain concepts such as 'pathways' did not easily translate across economic, language, cultural and institutional divides which leading to quite different understandings of the terms in both countries. Following an exploration of the Anglo-German case, John returns to the virtues of

policy learning – understood as explaining ‘good practice’ in the contexts in which it takes place and trying to learn from what worked and what did not work and why. In doing so, John highlights the dynamic nature of systems in a continual state of evolution but which is disregarded in policy borrowing approach. He acknowledges that the more modest aims of policy learning very much typified the work of David and argues that there is much greater chance of improvement if you seek incremental change going with the grain of the system rather than trying to graft on curriculum features that do not have any real cultural meaning or necessary institutional support.

### **What does it mean to conduct research into qualifications frameworks?**

Stephanie Allais (University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) focuses on the highly contentious issue of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and, through this, undertakes a deep engagement with David’s work in an aspect of national system building that has spread globally in the last two decades. She starts with a historical perspective on the development of NQFs in which to locate David’s conceptual and research contribution in the early 2000s. Stephanie observes that David was in a unique position to contribute to international understanding of NQFs due to the fact that Scotland was becoming recognized as having developed a relatively successful credit and qualifications framework. She recognizes that the nature of David contribution was not to promote the Scottish system internationally, but to argue that any measure of its success was down to an understanding of its national specificities; a point lost on policy-makers beyond the UK some of whom sought to adopt ‘Scottish best practice’ in non-Scottish conditions. Stephanie proceeds to draw on David’s conceptualization of NQFs as they spread internationally, merging these with other dimensions highlighted by her work with Michael Young in order to create a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding different possible trajectories of development. She concludes the article on a sober note, observing that despite all the research on qualifications frameworks, they have achieved relatively little in practice compared with their ‘policy promise’. Instead, and going back to David’s work, she argues that the prognosis for NQFs and qualifications reform more generally can be better understood in societal terms and how they interface with key national factors such as institutional and labour market logics.

### **Educational inequality in the United States: Can We Reverse the Tide?**

Adam Gamoran (University of Wisconsin) and Sarah Bruch (University of Iowa) summarize recent research on efforts to reduce inequality in education in the United States. Commenting on the relative lack of focus on inequalities in the US compared with the scale of the problem, they argue for a three-fold strategic response in terms of the research efforts to identify conditions that might reduce inequality – greater resources devoted to this area; the inclusion of new voices and perspectives and a more holistic approach to research and the use of multiple perspectives.

They recognise that the issue of inequality in secondary education was one of the central themes of David's research efforts and the attention he gave to the potential of what they term 'career and technical education' (CTE) to give a lift to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The second part of the article focuses on the role of CTE in terms of reducing inequalities in school-to-work transitions and while they suggest that there are benefits to be derived, the evidence is not decisive. The potential of such a role for CTE or vocational education and training in ameliorating inequalities was an issue that David considered throughout his career. In doing so he drew attention to the question of the 'currency' of vocational qualifications – the extent to which they are rewarded in the labour market – and once again, his concept of intrinsic and institutional logics is valuable in understanding how in some countries, vocational qualifications are less rewarded than in others.

The authors argue for the strategies explored in the first part of the article to be applied to the role of CTE and the particular role of research/practice partnerships. The research/practice partnerships they suggest echoes the collaborative research programme at CES which David was closely involved in during the early years of his career and which had a lasting impact on his view of research. This research orientation of the authors – grounded, multi-dimensional and partnership based – could be considered to be an integral part of the David Raffe intellectual tradition.



## **Scholarship, system improvement and reducing inequality in a new era – taking forward David’s intellectual legacy**

These nine diverse contributions help to illustrate David’s distinctive approach to scholarship – diverse yet coherent; evolving yet consistent; holistic and systemic yet highly detailed; grounded and pragmatic yet highly principled. In this final section, we reflect on ways in which his intellectual legacy and his model of scholarship can help us to understand and navigate and increasingly turbulent political and policy world of today.

Writing and researching in the changing era of globalization, David’s work spanned more than three decades that constituted an era of constant change. The early 1980s saw the growth of economic globalization, represented by the Thatcher political era in the UK, that opened up political and cultural divisions between England and Scotland (and eventually other countries of the UK). At the same time, there was the rise of international organisations including the EU and attempts to create transnational educational frameworks. It was also a period marked by a significant expansion of post-16 education participation across all four countries of UK that changed the shape of the respective ‘upper secondary’ education systems.

The exhaustion of Thatcherism in the 1990s heralded a New Labour Government that invested in education and brought about some democratic devolution across the UK, but enacted very limited curriculum and qualifications reform in England. It was in this reform context that education policy divergences between England and the other countries of the UK began to become more noticeable as Scotland, and to a lesser extent Wales, articulated distinctive policy trajectories from England and from Westminster. Under the Coalition Government and now the Conservatives, ‘managed divergence’ has given way to ‘accelerated divergence’. Recent Westminster Governments have been pursuing a more marketised model of education accountability that can be contrasted to the more ‘Nordic’ partnership orientations of Scotland and arguably Wales. These differences are, especially in Scotland, being highlighted by Brexit.

While the neoliberal era of the 1980s and 1990s brought about great educational change, fundamental inequalities persisted and even increased. At times the reform process appeared, in the words of Lumby and Foskett as ‘turbulence masquerading as change’<sup>2</sup>. Increases in education participation did not have all the wider effects that were hoped for. They led to a radical expansion of higher education, but this was not an expansion that produced greater equality. Furthermore, as higher education expanded, access to ‘youth jobs’ actually declined.

### **The relevance of David’s distinctive model of scholarship in a changing world**

These evolving contradictory landscapes constituted the essential terrains of David’s scholarship. David did not pursue a ‘niche’ approach to scholarship but, over the decades, developed a distinctive multi-faceted approach to research, writing and policy engagement. At the root of this was a strong sense of social justice that became focused on understanding the life-chances of young people within upper secondary education and in their post-school. While he considered himself part of the sociological tradition, David extended the boundaries of the tradition with his engagement with educational policy and system improvement. This of course was very much within the sociological tradition established by Booth and Rowntree and developed by AH Halsey, Jean Floud and John Goldthorpe.

His approach to scholarship was constantly evolving as he sought to respond from the sociological perspective to underlying economic, social and educational trends. As we have seen, as the decades progressed, his working became increasingly holistic and systemic – young people and their transitions; curriculum and qualifications reform; home international comparisons; the role of an expanding higher education system and how the policy process works. At the same time, this ever-expanding body of work remained situated and grounded and, unsurprisingly, David found himself continually involved in processes of policy engagement with political actors both within Scotland and beyond. While he did not occupy himself with wider debates in sociological theory or the sociology of education, he never stopped looking for ways to help fellow researchers and social partners to conceptualise change; hence

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<sup>2</sup> Lumby, J. and Foskett, N. (2005) *14-19 education: policy, leadership and learning*. London: Sage.

the rich sets of conceptual distinctions that were to become a hallmark of his contribution.

Looking back over the articles from the contributors and with a historical appreciation of David's body of work, it is possible to see a related set of ideas that may help to provide a bridge from the present to the future and that, in retrospect, will be seen to constitute the core of his intellectual legacy. These are a deep-seated appreciation of the specificity of national systems with distinct features operating in a globalized world; how these features need to be researched 'in the round' and the benefits of 'policy learning', both from a historical and from a comparative perspective in this task. It is for these reasons that David's intellectual approach can be described as 'holistic' and 'systemic' and yet 'specific'.

### **Developing the holistic approach to research and collaboration in the new era**

If David were still with us, he would be witnessing the new and volatile political era that we entered in 2016. These concern the rise of new regressive nationalisms, populist politics and deepening inequalities, marked in the UK by the way the current government is interpreting the result of the 2016 Referendum. The new era is also marked by new progressive counter-trends. All have their most recent roots in the 2008 financial crash and the austerity programmes that followed. These developments would have intrigued David and he would have brought to them his distinctive style of scholarship and a belief in openness and dialogue that is so sorely needed. David's policy learning orientation is becoming ever more relevant in an era of political populism that shows a disdain for expert knowledge.

But inheriting an intellectual legacy is more than an act of appreciation. It concerns how we collectively respond to the new context. Here we can recognise not only David's intellectual approach, powerful though it was and remains, but also his style of work and the kind of person he was. Pekka Kämäräinen sums this up in his recollections of David as a team player, collaborator and relationship builder and, as colleagues from CES also recall, how David would always put the interests of others before his own. So this is what this Special Issue of the *Journal of Education and Work* is really all about. It is about 'bridging divides', marked by a collaboration between a diverse group of academics who have come together in appreciation of the

essence of David's work and his ethical and moral outlook on life and, through this, to help improve their own orientations towards an educational, economic and social world that needs to become far more equal and universal.

### **Notes on contributors**

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